

## RESPONSIBLE PREACHING

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### 1. *The crisis of preaching*

BORED congregations, discouraged ministers, and many attempts to discover new forms of communicating the gospel signal a *crisis of preaching*. This crisis is not explained by the fact that preaching is difficult and often frustrating. We could live with that. Difficulties and frustrations can be utilised, if the preacher is convinced that his task is necessary and worth while. As long as we can see meaning in preaching; as long as we can hope that the words of men may become the word of God, no difficulties would deter the preacher from pursuing the privilege of preaching. The crisis is therefore a *theological* one. We have become uncertain as to who God is. We are not sure—deep down—whether our preaching corresponds to his will. This then creates our modern situation where responsible and effective preaching is declining and is also discouraged in our churches.

The *decline* of responsible and authentic preaching is indicated by the fact that many ministers lack an interest in serious theological study. They often take more time for visiting, organising, and administrating. And if they read, they are more inclined to read popular paper-backs dealing with more-or-less shallow pragmatic issues, or, what is worse, they read someone else's sermons as preparation for their own. Few ministers allow themselves to be confronted and disturbed by the real theological, socio-political and ethical problems of our time. Yet how can one preach responsibly, if one is not continuously confronted with re-discovering the substance of what one has to preach? How can one preach if one does not continuously struggle with the hermeneutical problem of bridging the gulf from the event of revelation to the questions and issues in our situation? I suggest that all the emphasis on counselling, visitation, evangelism, social action and administration will ultimately not build proper churches if the minister's work is not undergirded by a serious, meditative, and

continuous study of theology and its implication for the Church's 'mission' in the world of today.

It must be added that both society and the congregation *discourage* the minister from pursuing the task of theological reflection and responsible preaching. The emphasis in the ministry is on 'performance' and the results of performance are expected to be visibly presented in statistical data. The minister must 'be busy doing the work of the Lord'; and for many the 'work of the Lord' does not include the serious study of theology. Theological reflection and prayer—the two undergirding elements in Christian ministry—are often seen as a luxury; so much so, that a minister who sees the necessity to think and to pray may acquire a bad conscience because society in general and his congregation in particular suggest that he must be about 'doing' things. There is also the danger that our congregations, mainly through the influence of television and easy entertainment, become stupefied, so that their demand for responsible preaching is not made obvious and urgent to the minister. Many people want to be entertained rather than disturbed, or edified and built up into the image of Jesus Christ.

The following are a few reflections which may be helpful in re-discovering what responsible preaching can mean in our time.

## 2. *The God who comes*

'... we are ambassadors for Christ, *God* making *his* appeal through *us*' (2 Cor. 5.20). Who is this God who wants to make his appeal through us?

Traditionally we have thought of God as being essentially different from and independent of the world and of man. God is 'out there' where man is not. He is seen as a divine spiritual being who exists in splendid isolation, glorious self-sufficiency and void of any passion and suffering. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) defines God as follows:

There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, . . . ; and is alone in and unto

himself all sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which he has made . . .<sup>1</sup>

A similar understanding of God is seen in the following definition from the First Vatican Council (A.D. 1870):

The holy, Catholic, Apostolic Roman Church believes and confesses that there is one true and living God, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in intelligence, in will, and in all perfection, who, as being one, sole, absolutely simple and immutable spiritual substance, is to be declared as really and essentially distinct from the world, of supreme beatitude in and from himself, and ineffably exalted above all things which exist, or are conceivable, except himself.<sup>2</sup>

This God is so imprisoned in his holiness that he cannot look at sin, and cannot suffer. From this background we should listen to a poem by Vinicio Aguilar, arising out of the struggle for human dignity in Central America:

Where was god, daddy; where, where, where  
when the commissioners  
    broke the fence,  
    burnt the farm,  
    destroyed the harvest,  
    killed the pigs,  
    raped Imelda,  
    drank our rum?

HE WAS UP THERE, boy.

Where was god, daddy; where, where, where  
when because we complained  
    the state judge came and fined us  
    the bailiff came to arrest us  
    and even the priest came to insult us?

HE WAS UP THERE, boy.

<sup>1</sup> Cited from J. H. Leith, ed., *Creeeds of the Churches*, rev. edit. (Richmond: John Knox, 1973), p. 197.

<sup>2</sup> Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Faith, chapt. 1: of God, the Creator of all Things, cited from P. Schaff, *The Creeeds of Christendom*, 3 Vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), Vol. 11, p. 239.

Well then daddy; we must now tell him plainly  
that he must come down sometimes  
to be with us.

You can see how we are, daddy,  
with no fields sown, no farm, no pigs, nothing, and he  
behaves as if nothing had happened.  
It isn't right, you know, daddy.

If he's really up there  
let him come down

Let him come down to taste this cruel hunger with us  
let him come down and sweat  
in the maize-fields, come down to be imprisoned,  
let him come down and spew on the rich man  
who throws the stone and hides his hand,  
on the venal judge,  
on the unworthy priest,  
and on the bailiffs and commissioners  
who rob and kill  
the peasants;

because I certainly don't want to tell my son when he  
asks me one day:

HE WAS UP THERE, boy.<sup>1</sup>

And could we not all join in: is God to be found in the cancer wards of our hospitals? In the prison cells of modern concentration camps? Does he starve with those who hunger and thirst with those who have no water? Can I expect God to be near when my existence disintegrates?

It is strange that in many 'Western' cultures, people have great difficulties relating God's being to weakness, suffering, sickness—and that in spite of the biblical insistence that God's 'power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12.9). The explanation for this difficulty lies firstly in the age-old theological conviction that God cannot suffer, and secondly in the marriage of the Christian religion with a military triumphalism like that of Emperor Constantine in the beginning of the fourth

<sup>1</sup> 'A letter from Central America', *International Review of Missions*, LXVI (July, 1977), pp. 249-50.

century, or a cultural triumphalism, like that of German Liberalism of the nineteenth century or the 'American dream', both of which were thought to provide the solution to man's problems.

But have we not tended to paint God too much as *we* would want him to be? Have we not failed to understand him as *he* has shown himself in his revelation? Was it not *we*, who wanted God to be unable to suffer, to be perfect, and strong? Have not *we* ascribed to him all those attributes which we would like to have, but cannot attain? This would mean that we are worshipping those characteristics which we would like to have ourselves, but cannot attain. We are thus using God as a divine validation for our own dreams and ambitions. This has led to the situation that even in Christian circles a striving for success, a glorification of what one may call 'fun' Christianity, an identification with the values of one's culture—be it capitalism or socialism—was easily reconciled with the Christian understanding of God. God became the divine supporter of the *status quo* and the divine validator of the political and economic establishment.

This traditional understanding of God as the holy deity who exists 'up there' or 'out there' has had consequences! In soteriology it has led to the proposition that God could not look at sin and therefore cannot accept the sinner. The doctrine of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ attempts to deal with this problem. Jesus' death on the cross is seen as being the atonement and expiation for man's sin. The believer becomes acceptable to the Holy God through the sinless sacrifice of Jesus Christ. For preaching this means that the sermon is mainly understood in terms of proclamation or declaration of what God has done in Jesus Christ approximately two thousand years ago. It means talking 'about' that holy and self-consistent God who has performed his soteriological work in Jesus Christ.

The traditional understanding of God, however, and the resultant understanding of preaching is problematic for several reasons. How can we talk 'about' God as if he were an object over against which we may presume to be a subject? No man can take a standpoint over against God and then talk 'about' him. God is, as Rudolf Bultmann has reminded us again and

again, the all-encompassing reality of which and about which we cannot speak.<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich has a similar intention when he says that 'God does not exist. He is being-itself . . .'.<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: 'There is no God that "there is"; God "is" in personal relationship, and his being is his being a person.'<sup>3</sup> For the problem discussed here this means that we cannot talk 'about' God. We can only make our existence so available, that God may speak through us. This means, that before we can speak, before we can act, we must have patiently listened; we must have patiently learned the exercise of passivity, in order that it is not we but God who becomes active through us.

This raises two important issues, the problem of *biblical authority* and the problem of *Christian spirituality*. If the preacher wants to *preach* the word of God, he must first of all *hear* it! Biblical exegesis must be carried out in such a way that the text with its own authority starts to speak to us. If we go to the text with theological pre-commitments, be it the dogma of 'inerrancy' or of 'historical relativity'—then we cannot really listen. *We are speaking before we listen*. We only allow the text to speak to us within the dogmatic framework which *we* have set. Our listening is limited to what we know already. The text cannot say anything new! What Protestants have accused Catholics of, viz. that in its encounter with the biblical text the Church is not engaging in a dialogue but in a monologue, would equally apply to all Christians who are not ready to listen. Only in radical openness to the Bible can one hear something *new*!

The other important issue is that of Christian spirituality. Listening means learning the art of meditation, study, reflection and prayer. The preacher must learn to get 'in tune' with God's mission in our world and history, before he can become a 'fellow worker' with God.

The traditional understanding of God is also deficient because it fails to appreciate what the Christian tradition has called the 'trinitarian' nature of God. This doctrine attempts to express that God does not exist in and for himself. God is not a moral

<sup>1</sup> 'What does it mean to speak of God?' in: R. W. Funk, ed., *Faith and Understanding 1* (London: SCM, 1969), pp. 53-65.

<sup>2</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: University Press, 1951), p. 205.

<sup>3</sup> *Act and Being* (London: Collins, 1962), p. 126; I have slightly modified the translation.

law which is so captivated in its own justice that he cannot take the injustice and suffering of the world into himself. God is love. God is 'God with us'. The covenant with his people is not something accidental to his nature, rather, it is the manifestation of his nature. The doctrine of the incarnation wants to capture the dynamic nature of God by insisting that humanity is not strange or accidental to his being, but part of it. The cross is the eloquent reminder that suffering and death is not strange to God's nature, but God has taken it into himself and thereby removed its ultimate threat. God is God in that he can suffer and die without ceasing to be God.

This God who has shown his passionate interest in people, who has displayed his identification with humanity in his *Son, Jesus Christ*, remains that God when he becomes real to us in the *Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit wants to teach us that it is really God who holds us when our existence tends to disintegrate, who saves us, when we are lost; who does not require a moral or dogmatic entrance examination before we can experience his presence, but who loves us while we are yet sinners, and who says 'yes' to us long before we can say 'yes' to him or to ourselves.

Theology, in other words, has the task of thinking God, not according to human aspiration, but in correspondence with his self-revelation. The proper question is: where and how has God revealed himself? The Christian answer is: in Jesus Christ. More concretely: in that Jesus whose life was marked by poverty, struggle for human dignity, and solidarity with the outsider; who accepted suffering as a constitutive part of his way of life; whose passionate surrender to the will of God and commitment to incarnate God's love for man was the direct cause for his crucifixion. Even Gethsemane and the cross could not make him depart from his way of love. If then God has revealed himself in the poverty, love and humanity of Jesus, it should make us cautious if pastors and theologians join in the popular quest to make and understand God in our image, according to the values of our cultural pursuits, and then worship him. The spirit of God will point us to Christ crucified as the place where God has displayed his nature.

The intention of the trinitarian understanding of God is, however, not only to ascertain that our salvation and our

sanctification is really of God, but also to define that it is *God's nature* to come to us in the Son and in the Spirit. God *is* in that he loves, speaks, comes. This intention of the so-called doctrine of the trinity has been lost because the Church has so rationalised this doctrine—one may only think of comparing Father, Son and Holy Spirit to ice, water and steam—that its relevance has become elusive. Indeed one may make a good case for saying that Christological and trinitarian doctrines with all their justification in fighting off heretical tendencies in the Church, have at the same time so intellectualised our faith that we tend to forget that we cannot say 'Jesus is Lord' unless we in radical discipleship incarnate in our own life the values for which he lived and died; and that we can hardly call for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, unless we call upon the Spirit to help us in our weakness; not for selfish religious gain, but for making the love of God concrete through our existence in the world today.

For preaching this may mean that the sermon is not a proclamation or information 'about' God or about what God has done, but it is a participation in God's coming to man. 'So we are Ambassadors for Christ, *God making his appeal through us*. We beseech you on behalf of Christ to be reconciled to God.' (2 Cor. 5.20)

### 3. *How does the coming God come to us?*

God comes to us in that he makes himself known in our conscience as the true answer to our ultimate questions. He alone is true (Rom. 3.4); therefore he alone can be our saviour. Because God becomes known in and by us as saviour, therefore his coming has *word-character*. When his coming becomes real to us we speak of faith.

However, here *caution* is in order, lest we perceive God's coming simply to be an exercise of the intellect. This was and is the theological fallacy of movements such as Protestant orthodoxy, fundamentalism and 'modernism'. God's coming should not be conceived as the imparting of theoretical information; and faith is not the intellectual acceptance of dogmatic propositions or the theoretical affirmation of historical events.

We shall try to clarify our contention by adopting the distinction which the English philosopher John L. Austin makes



between performative and constative utterances.<sup>1</sup> A *constative* utterance refers to an event which has already taken place; it is there apart from the utterance; the utterance only says what already is. Applied to our discussion it may mean, e.g. that in Jesus' substitutionary death God has saved us; we only need to be informed about it. Preaching would be the imparting of the information that God in and through Jesus' death has saved us. Faith would mean accepting this information as true.

A *performative* utterance does not simply point to an event but 'performs' an event. The utterance is a constitutive part of the event of which it speaks. The event is not complete without the utterance. This is probably what Paul meant when in 2 Cor. 5.18-20 he maintains that God has called forth *both* the *event* of reconciliation *and* the *ministry* of reconciliation. And because both belong together, Paul can say that *God* makes his appeal through *us*. It means that God is effectively present in the preaching event. The hearer is not simply informed about what happened in the past, but he is changed by being drawn into an event which the preaching of the gospel makes possible.<sup>2</sup>

This has consequences for our preaching! Preaching is not primarily the giving of theoretical information which the hearer must accept as true or reject as false. Rather, preaching is the attempt to gather up the hearer into a story of God's love. Such a story of God's love has a self-authenticity which fascinates the hearer, and in hearing changes him at the depth of his being.

The parables of Jesus may serve to illustrate what I mean. Jesus does not give theoretical doctrinal information about God. He tells a story with the intention that the hearer might find himself in the story and thus be changed in listening to it. When such existential modification of the hearer takes place, one may speak of a language-event.

Take the parable of the mustard seed in Mark 4.30-32:

And he (Jesus) said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is

<sup>1</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*. The William James lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962). Austin does emphasise, however, that it is often difficult to distinguish clearly between the two.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Austin: 'the performative is happy or unhappy as opposed to true or false'. (*How to do Things with Words*, p. 132.)

like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

A rational interpretation tries to capture the message in a proposition like this: insignificant beginnings lead to a mighty end. The Master of parable interpretation, Joachim Jeremias, says: '... out of the most insignificant beginnings, invisible to human eye, God creates his mighty Kingdom, which embraces all the peoples of the world.'<sup>1</sup> But is this really what Jesus meant when he was talking to the peasants in Palestine? Was he trying to teach them a theoretical lesson as to how God works in history? I doubt it. At least that does not seem to have been his primary concern. Was he not rather trying to relate the reality of God's working to their experience of life and faith? Was he not saying, that their faith, even if it is as small as the mustard seed, stands under the promise of God's greatness? God will take the slightest inclination of the human heart towards him and make it into what it should be.

Or take the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.30-37): 'a *fool* was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...'—one has to interpret like this, because that street was well-known as a hide-out for robbers; only a fool would go there alone and unprotected. What is to be expected, happened: he is robbed, beaten, and left lying half dead on the side of the road. He sees a priest and the Levite coming. Men of God! Hope dawns—but he cannot cry for help because he is nearly dead. They walk past. They had their reasons, and those reasons were theological ones. A dead body cannot be touched because uncleanness would thereby be transferred to them. They walk past. For them he was dead. A Samaritan comes—hated by the Jews and no Jew could expect any help from such a person. But the unexpected happened. The eyes of love seek life where on the surface there is only death. He turns him over, binds his wounds, and sets him back on to the road of life.

In hearing this story, do I not suddenly find myself lying half-dead on the side of the road of life? Answers are fired at

<sup>1</sup> *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1963), p. 149.

me from all directions, but, like Job in the Old Testament, when I expected answers to come from my friends, from my religious friends, they appear to be very artificial. But God is love and love is very inventive. Unexpectedly, somehow, miraculously, through some encounter, through some helping hand, through some kind word, through some life-giving thought, I am set on to the road of life again.

Preaching, then, must try to create a situation in which the hearer becomes aware of God's loving concern for him, a concern which invites the hearer's response. Preaching aims to win the hearer over to God; it attempts to create a situation in which God is encountered as the answer to man's deepest needs.

It may be helpful to remind ourselves that every reality calls for a corresponding form. And the reality 'God' calls for a form of preaching which so tells the story of God's love that it fascinates and changes us. The hearer must find a place in the sermon. Preaching therefore has a sacramental dimension. It may become a vehicle for grace. It includes the hope and prayer that in the event of telling the story of God's love the hearer might not remain the same.

In this context we must also talk about the *political dimension* of preaching. If preaching is the event where God as God comes to man, and if this event cannot be conceived simply as the imparting of intellectual information, but as the total re-orientation of life, then all preaching must have a political dimension. When God breaks into our reality, then he modifies our existence to become conformed to his will. When God the creator breaks into his creation as the saviour, he wants to save the totality of human existence. If therefore the preacher wants to allow *God* room to communicate, then he can bracket nothing out of his proclamation. Preaching which does not address itself to political issues, to the evils of exploitation, to the inherent dangers of giving divine validation to cultural values, is not letting God have his way. A church which claims to be politically neutral and impartial is a contradiction in terms. It is a church which has left the way which not only Jesus our Lord, but already before him Amos and Hosea have clearly indicated. The gospel is never impartial. That does not mean that it is to be made serviceable for certain parties to use the adjective 'Christian'. But the gospel as the medium of God's

grace participates in Jesus' way to make human life human; and that means going to those—even if it means crucifixion—who by our culture and economical and political systems and values are kept in hunger, poverty and anxiety. To those who may still be called the marginal people of society, or the wretched of the earth. Who these people are must be decided in every situation anew.

We have to face a further problem! It may be formulated like this: is the sanctification of the preacher a constitutive part of the preaching event? One is reminded of the famous dictum of Martin Luther:

What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ would be apostolic, even though Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod did it.<sup>1</sup>

And a contemporary Lutheran theologian says: '... the sanctification of the theologian is not constitutive for the situation of proclamation.'<sup>2</sup> One must be sympathetic with the intention of this insistence. If the validity of the gospel were to depend on the sanctification of the preacher, who then could preach? Are we not all sinners who 'fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3.23)?

It is also important to safeguard the hermeneutical principle that the Scriptures are their own interpreter (*sacra scriptura sui ipsius interpres*), so that the biblical message can be protected against subjective dogmatic or ecclesiastical distortion. The exegete must remain servant of the text, he should not attempt to become a master over it. But must this lead to a division between the message and the messenger? Indeed, in a time when the credibility of the Christian message is seriously questioned from all sides, one can no longer limit the kerygma to an orthodox content of the message. The message includes the messenger, and therefore one should speak of a kerygmatic existence rather than simply speaking of the kerygma.

Ernst Fuchs asserts correctly that 'even most pious talk of

<sup>1</sup> *Preface to the Epistles of Saint James and Saint Jude* 1545 (1522), in: *Works of Martin Luther*, The Philadelphia Edition (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1932), Vol. VI, p. 478.

E. Jüngel, *Predigten* (München: Kaiser, 1968), p. 129 (my translation).

God without our involvement is atheistic';<sup>1</sup> and W. D. Just says: 'While in scientific statements one must generally aim for the highest measure in content and objectivity, in religious language games "objective" talk ("sächliches" Reden) without personal participation is an "offence against the rules".'<sup>2</sup>

And is not this the imperative arising from the biblical message? Is not Jesus' personal solidarity with publicans and sinners a necessary part of, yes, a presupposition for the credibility of his message that God loves sinners?

Or one may take the gospel of Mark where Peter's orthodox confession 'You are the Christ' (8.29) is rejected by Jesus (8.33). Even the demons can make such propositional statements, e.g. 3.11: 'You are the Son of God' (cf. 5.7). Only he who denies himself, takes up the cross and follows Jesus (8.34) can know Jesus as Son of God, and can therefore responsibly confess: 'You are the Christ'.

And when Paul says: 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (I Cor. 2.2), he does not simply speak of a cross-centred message, but he speaks of a crucified existence.

In the Epistle of James a merely propositional faith is also rejected (2.14-26). Before God, it does not count if a man *says* he has faith, even if this faith is propositionally sound—'you believe that God is one', v. 19. Such faith is demonic, if it is not accompanied by the good works which according to James are necessary for salvation.

This emphasis is not limited to the New Testament; indeed it is the central affirmation of every life out of which a responsible affirmation of the reality of 'God' arises. In the Old Testament especially the prophet Jeremiah comes to mind. We therefore conclude that the preacher must in his life incarnate and manifest the message that he is trying to preach. Preaching 'Christ' is a witness to Christ, which arises out of the context of a life where the Lordship of Christ has found a correspondence in radical discipleship. Outside this context of discipleship, the reality 'Christ'—who was and is and is to come—is distorted, and therefore preaching is no longer responsible.

<sup>1</sup> *Jesus. Wort und Tat* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1971), p. 94 (my translation); cf. p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> *Religiöse Sprache und Analytische Philosophie. Sinn und Unsinn religiöser Aussagen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975), p. 152.

This is no presumptuous claim for the sinlessness of the preacher, nor does it make the validity of God's salvation dependent on human performance. But it suggests the conclusion that the *content* and the *effectiveness* of the gospel is at stake in the preacher's existence. If, to take an example, a preacher tries to tell the story of Jesus as the story of God's love, but shows no desire to incarnate it in his own existence then the message in its content and effectiveness is compromised. God has limited himself to make the obedience and performance of his 'fellow workers' a necessary part of accomplishing his plans. The preacher must bring his own existence into the preaching event—only then can he credibly claim and proclaim that God in Christ claims our total allegiance.

#### 4. *What then is responsible preaching?*

A responsible sermon concentrates upon the subject of the text. The preacher is not master over, but servant of the text. He does not go to the text with certain preconceived dogmatic notions, but he approaches the text in a listening, expecting attitude.

For this reason the historical critical method of exegesis remains an indispensable tool for exegeting a text. This method serves the purpose of safeguarding the text against the arbitrary interpretation of the exegete. Yet in all his scientific exactitude the interpreter must not forget that it is the intention of the biblical text to let God come to expression. Ernst Fuchs says: 'The historical-critical method of interpretation of New Testament texts has done its duty when the necessity for preaching arises from the text'.<sup>1</sup> The preacher will expect the 'more' but he will know that this divine word can only come in and through the human word.

Methodologically it is suggested that in the preparation of a sermon the preacher has to go through three stages: First, the historical critical phase in which his intention is to understand the text in its original situation and intention. Secondly, the stage of meditative reception, in which the preacher tries to sink himself into the text, of letting the text become part of his

<sup>1</sup> 'The reflection which is imposed on Theology by the historical-critical method', in: *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1964, pp. 32-47), p. 38.

being, and of reflecting about the text in relation to the situation into which he wants to preach it. During this stage the preacher must also try to evaluate the text in its relation to the biblical context. The preacher is ultimately not concerned with a single biblical text as such; he wants to hear the Word of God; that word which is defined in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the *one* word of God (John 1.1-18); Jesus Christ is the visible image of the invisible God (Col. 1-15); 'in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily' (Col. 2.9); he is 'the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14.6). The preacher must therefore be a theologian! He must develop a theological framework which will serve him in his reflective evaluation of the text. This framework must be constantly guarded against individual subjectivism by leaving it flexible and by trying to focus it on Christ crucified as the place of God's self-definition (e.g. so Paul in I Cor. 1-2). Thirdly, there is the rhetorical productive stage in which the substance of the text is brought into a form which is conducive to the situation, in order that it may become the word of God. *That* it becomes the word of God remains the work of the Holy Spirit.

The responsible sermon must in its form correspond to the subject which it tries to communicate. If God as the 'Coming One' wants to come in the preaching event and modify the existence of the hearer, then one cannot underhandedly change the preaching situation into a theology lecture or a history class. The latter would be the case if for instance on Easter Sunday one goes about trying to prove historically that the tomb was empty, and then lead his hearers to an intellectual acceptance of the resurrection of Jesus. That is not preaching. Preaching the resurrection of Jesus as God's act of bringing new life out of death would mean participation in creating a situation in which the listener, being dead in anxiety, frustration and meaninglessness, is raised to new hope and new life. That he can preach such a message with confidence, and that he can expect God to create new life, is grounded in his conviction of faith that in the resurrection of Jesus God has made himself known as the one 'who gives life to the dead' (Rom. 4.17), or with other words: 'who justifies the ungodly' (Rom. 4.5).

Indeed, the difference between a sermon and a religious talk or a theological lecture is that the preacher as preacher hopes

and prays that in his words God himself may begin to speak. As Paul says in I Thess. 2.13:

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

The responsible sermon takes the situation of the hearer seriously. We may therefore distinguish between the substance or content and the form of the message. The substance—in Paul's words: 'Christ crucified'—must remain the same in every situation; the form however must vary because the questions to which the Christian message is addressed as the answer vary from situation to situation.

This is why love is necessary for preaching. God knows us because he loves us and the preacher will only discern the real questions of his congregation if he loves his hearers.

To maintain the substance of our message we must never cease to study theology. The study of theology has the single function of maintaining the substance of the Christian message. To develop a form which corresponds to the substance of the message and at the same time takes the situation seriously we must study sociology, psychology, politics etc. Yet, most important is, that the formal structure of the sermon corresponds to the truth of what it wants to communicate. And here we have suggested before, that the narrative form may be the most conducive one. This is not to say that apologetic and doctrinal preaching should cease. In certain situations it may be called for, but theologically it should not be the model for the sermon, but rather for the lecture.

Finally, every sermon is a risk! This risk cannot be avoided. It should be taken in the hope that God may again take our human words and by the loving activity of his Spirit let them become the word of God.

##### *5. What may we expect as a result of responsible preaching?*

If responsible preaching becomes the vehicle by which God presents himself, then this means that God's reality breaks into our reality, or breaks open in our reality. This has consequences.



It includes the element of *surprise* which lets all other things appear as secondary. As if a farm-hand in the midst of his dreary and hopeless activity suddenly discovers a treasure (Matt. 13.44)! This is the real evangelical miracle that God breaks into our everyday life, unexpectedly, holding us and renewing us.

This surprise is one of *joy*. The God who defines himself in Jesus and presents himself in the Spirit is neither a moral law nor a judge who needs to be feared. He is the father who by his inspiring love wants to liberate us for true charismatic worship and human social engagement.

If God becomes real as God then this must change our understanding of *reality*. If with Paul we define unbelief as sin, and faith as life out of God, then any identification of our cultural and religious ideas with God cannot be justified. God who at the centre of his being is love, at the same time becomes a judge of all structures which make and keep human life inhuman.

Where the word of God is received as the word *of God*, there *community* becomes a fact. I say 'community' rather than 'church' because what we especially in the Western world, in light of the technological threat to life, have to rediscover, is our dependence on one another. The inspiring depth of human existence can only be discovered in charismatic renewal with God, and in human involvement with each other.

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